

Professionalism

Habits are Habit-Forming

Do you feel like a role model to your trainees?

Maybe you did not realize that learners are sifting through everything you say and do, inside and outside the patient care setting, "deciding" what parts of your behavior they will incorporate into their physician role.

Observation learning, acquired from watching others and through experimentation, is the primary way trainees develop their clinical and interpersonal skills and habits.¹

Have you personally observed and benefited from working with physicians who consistently demonstrated the best qualities of patient care, clinical judgment and professionalism? Chances are those physicians had some powerful role models and they have reflected carefully on the example they want others to see and emulate. Have you experienced physicians whose behaviors you hope not to emulate? How do you ensure that you don't model such behaviors at any time?

In your clinical practice, what behaviors are you modeling for your trainees?

Ask yourself the following:

Do I encourage self-learning or do you micromanage the case?

Do I model and teach work organization or do I reprimand for inadequacies?

Do I demonstrate and talk through the steps in the procedure or remain quiet and, then, take over when the trainee flounders?

Do I include patients in your discussions or assume (or act as if) that the physician has all the pertinent information and that the patient has nothing to contribute?

The first step in becoming a positive role model entails recognizing our own behavioral habits. Is your habit to empty others' buckets or fill them up?² A moment of lost composure that translates into throwing an instrument (underhand or overhand, makes no difference!), snapping at a nurse or belittling a patient, reflects on you and may, ultimately, on the practices and habits of your trainees.

Realize that your habits can be habit-forming for others.

Set a good example, as "example is not the main thing in influencing others, it's the only thing."³

¹This teaching tip is developed from J. Friedland's chapter "Social learning theory and development of clinical performances," in Edwards JC, Friedland JA, Bing-You R (eds), Residents teaching skills, New York, Springer 2002, p.32. This revised book is an excellent resource and belongs on the medical teacher's shelf.

²Rath T, Clifton, DO. How full is your bucket? Positive strategies for work and life. New York: Gallup Press. 2004.

³Attributed to Albert Schweitzer, from J. Friedland's chapter.